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SUBJECT: EXCHANGE WITH CHAIRMAN OF EXTREMIST ISLAMIST GROUP

Classified By: P/E Counselor D.C. McCullough, reason para 1.5 d.

11. (C) Summary. At a chance encounter with polcouns, IOJ Chairman Fazlul Haq Amini denounced Jamaat Islami as power hungry, criticized the BDG on several fronts, opposed the proposed USD 2 billion Tata investment in Bangladesh, indicated the Awami League has offered him money to quit the ruling alliance, and described in general terms his vision for Bangladesh as a truly Islamic state. How, he asked, could IOJ could improve its image in the U.S. and why is the USG anti-madrassah? End Summary.

12. (C) At a small dinner on December 14, polcouns was encountered by Mufti Fazlul Haq Amini, MP and Chairman of his faction of Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ). The USG, he noted, has negative opinions about the IOJ. During the one-hour exchange to clear up "misunderstandings," the affable, sometimes humorous Amini

-- Denounced Jamaat Islami Bangladesh (JIB) as power-hungry, and predicted the next generation of JIB leadership, trained in the violent Shibir student wing, would be "extremist." IOJ, he claimed, is interested only in propagating Islamic values, not political power, and it is out-polled by JIB only because IOJ does not organize or operate as a political party. He denied he has any interest in a cabinet seat.

-- Declined to comment on the current political situation because, he smiled, his status as a member of the ruling coalition obliges him to be circumspect.

-- Stated that legal and other changes would be required to make Bangladesh a truly Islamic state. A Pakistan-like blasphemy law would be a good idea. In this new state, women would have the vote, sharia/interest free banking would be implemented, taxes other than zakat would be lowered but not eliminated, and religious minorities would not be deemed as second class citizens. He could think of no foreign model for Bangladesh or IOJ.

-- Accepted women working in garment factories, but said they should be segregated from men.

-- Saw no differences in outlook between Islamist parties in Pakistan and Bangladesh, or between Bangladeshi and Pakistani societies.

-- Denied any kind of relationship with PMO Parliamentary Affairs Advisor S.Q. Chowdhury, one of the BNP's principal defenders of including IOJ in the ruling alliance.

-- Characterized Ahmadis as non-Muslims attempting to deceive "real" Muslims, when asked why IOJ had mounted such a big campaign against such a small minority. JIB, he added, has identical views on Ahmadis.

-- Rationalized IOJ's presence in the ruling coalition, despite popular displeasure over corruption and poor governance, by saying IOJ supporters know this is preferable

to giving political advantage to Awami League president Sheikh Hasina, whose actions when she was in power against IOJ madrassahs and allegations against him of terrorism were "un-Islamic."

-- Characterized Hasina as unscrupulous, said he had been approached by AL leaders to reach a "political understanding," and indicated they had offered him money to quit the ruling party alliance.

-- Opposed the proposed USD 2 billion steel/power investment in Bangladesh by the Indian Tata group because it would lead to Indian exploitation of a Bangladeshi natural resource. Asked if he opposed on similar grounds the big Chinese coal mine in northern Bangladesh, Amini replied that his desire for good relations with China precluded a direct answer.

-- Blamed the August 21 attack on Sheikh Hasina on people wanting to destabilize Bangladesh.

-- Credited the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) with improving law and order, but at the cost of killing many people.

-- Stated he has never traveled to the U.S., but has visited the UK.

-- Requested regular inter-action for the sake of enhanced understanding, but dodged the question of what he felt the appropriate U.S. role should be in Bangladesh. He also declined to repeat his host's suggestion that he wants "friendly" relations with the U.S.

¶3. (C) Asked how IOJ could better improve its image in the U.S., polcouns suggested that IOJ demonstrate its support for democracy and human rights, and in particular condemn on principle attacks on Ahmadis, Hindus, and the political opposition. Amini claimed, weakly, that he had done this; polcouns urged him to give such condemnations greater publicity. Amini then asked why the USG believes madrassahs do nothing but train terrorists. Polcouns noted that madrassahs serve as a critical educational safety net in many countries, and that only a handful of madrassahs with a history of sending graduates into terrorism attract this type of concern.

¶4. (C) Bio: Amini is also principal of the big Lalbagh madrassah in Dhaka, and president of the Ulama Parishad (Council of Islamic Scholars). At the end of 2003, he spearheaded the anti-Ahmadiyya campaign, and before that the campaign against noted Bangladeshi feminist author Taslima Nasreen. He is known for strong anti-U.S., anti-West, and anti-NGO views. His denials aside, he is widely believed to want a cabinet seat, which some observers cited as the driving motivation behind his anti-Ahmadiyya agitation.

¶5. (C) Comment: Amini, friendly and on his best behavior, steered clear of anything patently controversial, in part by offering virtually no opinion without direct prompting. IOJ-BNP animosities are well known, but the sharpness of his criticism of JIB was unexpected and is not reciprocated when we ask JIB about IOJ. Amini lacks the polish and worldly knowledge of mainstream Islamist leaders, but was at ease with foreigners and Bangladeshis who were drinking and who had views contrary to his own. Amini was summoned when the conversation turned to fears by a dissident BNP MP and a leader of Ershad's BJP that JIB, as an aggressive, "armed" vertically-integrated enterprise, poses a far greater threat to Bangladesh than does IOJ. We are dubious but not completely dismissive of the notion that the AL wants to bribe Amini to defect from the BNP; we heard this allegation elsewhere two weeks ago, also from a someone with an anti-AL bias.